

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

September 17, 2013 at 7:50am

The Rich Get Richer

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Distinctly Catholic

The Forbes 400 list of the wealthiest Americans indicates that they are doing very, very well. Their total wealth increased 19 percent in the past year, topping out at \$2.02 trillion, as opposed to last year's meager showing of only \$1.7 trillion. The average net worth of those on this list is now at \$5 billion, compared to \$4.2 billion when last year's list came out.

Pope Francis has repeatedly, and trenchantly, denounced growing income inequality as a moral danger, a threat to human dignity and civilized society. Last month, Bishop Robert McElroy penned a column commemorating Labor Day for the USCCB's media blog that examined income inequality through the lens of Catholic social teaching. At that same blog series, Fr. Clete Kiley also looked at income inequality in terms of traditional Catholic teaching. The verdict is unanimous: Gross income inequality is a moral enormity that cries to heaven ? and to us ? for amelioration.

I would like to step outside the moral argument today and examine the political import of income inequality, in both sense of the word ?political.? Income inequality threatens both the political life of a nation and it distorts our partisan politics today here in the U.S.

It should be obvious from even the most cursory reading of history that income inequality threatens the very foundations of society. This is more so in our media-drenched age. At the time of the French Revolution, resentment against the rich was great and was the critical source of the revolutionary fervor, and those revolutionaries did not daily have to confront images of the uber-rich and how they live. You can't go to the vet's office without seeing the latest issue of some magazine that extols the lifestyles of the uber-rich.

Ronald Reagan brought the idea of trickle down economics into the nation's political dialogue, but it was a sham then and it is a sham today. When the uber-rich get even richer, it does nothing to alleviate poverty. The investor class is far removed from the lives of the poor, and their wealth is often garnered from a smart tax haven as from productive investment, the trickle has stopped completely. The financialization of so much of the economy is the main culprit here, producing immediate, non-negotiable incentives to increase stock prices, no matter the consequences for the rest of the society.

Conversely, when middle class incomes raise, the poor have at least a shot at improving their lives. Middle class workers live alongside the poor. They know their burdens. They can help them find a job, not on Wall Street but on Main Street. Middle class workers can work at improving local schools, so that the children living in poverty might find in education a way out of poverty. The owner of a small business can hire more workers when business is good. On Wall Street, the stock price will rise when a company lays off workers.

It is not only the economic consequences that destabilize a society. In a free society, the most influential actors in the political life of a nation will always be the moneyed interest. This is Schlesinger 101. The political influence of the rich has only increased since the Supreme Court's decision in Citizens United, but it was plenty strong before that decision was handed down. As the costs of running campaigns goes up, the dependence of candidates in both parties on people of means and the contributions they make only increases. Woe betide the person or party that challenges that influence.

Of course, it is the historic vocation of the Democratic Party to challenge the moneyed interest. Unfortunately, the Democrats are obsessed with other issues. In the governor's race in Virginia, the ads are fast and furious here on local TV. Democrat Terry McAuliffe is essentially running as the candidate of Planned Parenthood, all of his ads focused on issues related to access to abortion and/or his opponent's desire to make divorce harder to get. The Democratic campaign is frighteningly reminiscent of last year's Democratic National Convention which the great Melinda Henneberger dubbed "Abortion-palooza."

Earlier this year, there was a controversy about Dr. Ben Carson's assertion that he opposes same-sex marriage, which led to his being disinvited from speaking at Johns Hopkins Medical School where he directs the pediatric neurosurgery department. I am no fan of Dr. Carson, to be sure, but Michael Kinsley, a liberal down to his toes, was on to something when he wrote of the episode:

All he [Carson] did was say on television that he opposes same-sex marriage?an idea that even its biggest current supporters had never even heard of a couple of decades ago. Does that automatically make you a homophobe and cast you into the outer darkness? It shouldn't. But in some American subcultures?Hollywood, academia, Democratic politics?it apparently does. You may favor raising taxes on the rich, increasing support for the poor, nurturing the planet, and repealing Section 14(b) of the Taft-Hartley Act, but if you don't support gay marriage, you're out of the club.

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Carson has spouted some ridiculously simplistic ideas about politics and economics, but when he crossed the PC-line on same-sex marriage, he evidently went too far.

The divide within the Democratic Party between its working class wing, concerned about mostly about incomes and working conditions, and the professorial wing, concerned about culture war issues, has been around since at least the 1972 Democratic National Convention. This is not news. But, I fear it is getting

worse. Earlier this month, there was an effort at the AFL-CIO to forge a broad alliance with other progressive groups, such as those groups that advocate for abortion rights. The eventual resolution was sufficiently watered down to cause no threat on this front, thank God. The idea that the labor movement would sign on to an abortion rights? agenda would be a stark betrayal of its history. Many union locals got their start in church basements.

Had the AFL-CIO jumped the shark and gone ?all in? with the abortion rights movement, it would have been more than a betrayal of its past. It would also be a betrayal of the moment. If ever there was a time when the Left should be focused on issues of income inequality and workers? rights, it is now. They should not dilute their message, they should focus on it like a laser beam and insist that the Democratic candidates they support do the same. Income inequality should be at the top of the nation?s political agenda. Only the Democratic Party will put it there and they are busy with the culture wars. It is worse than a shame, although it is that. It is even worse than a moral enormity, although it is that too. It is dangerous.

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